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SUBJECT: PERSGA Coordinating Protection of Red Sea

REFTEL: PREVIOUS JEDDAH CABLE ON PERSGA

¶1. Summary: PERSGA is a Jeddah-based intergovernmental organization that builds capacity and organizes research for the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden ecosystem. They are assessing land-based activities that affect the Red Sea and working with member governments on coastal zone management plans.
End Summary

Red Sea Ecosystem Has High Biodiversity, Endemism

¶2. PERSGA (www.persga.org) is an acronym for the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Amman-based Regional Environment Officer and Jeddah E/P Chief visited PERSGA on March 18 and spoke with Secretary General Dr. Ziad Abu-Ghararah, a PhD in environmental engineering from Virginia Tech.

¶3. Dr. Abu-Ghararah said that PERSGA is an intergovernmental organization whose seven members are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Jordan, Yemen and Djibouti. He commented that there is excellent cooperation and a "united vision" towards the Red Sea by the members. He called attention to the biodiversity of the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden ecosystem, which includes coral reefs, sea birds, mangroves, dugongs, sea turtles, and many species of shark. There is a high level of endemism (species found only there) in the Red Sea, he said. Saudi Arabia contributes 50% of PERSGA's funding and Egypt contributes 30%. PERSGA has sixteen staff, and expects to reach 40 staff within four years.

Possible World Heritage Sites?

¶4. ESTH Officer said that the USG sits on the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, that we are interested in expanding the number of UNESCO World Heritage sites in the Arab world, and that sites in the Red Sea might be an appropriate way to do this. PERSGA's Dr. Abu-Ghararah supported this idea. He said that he is already actively consulting with Saudi

colleagues on designating sites in the Red Sea as World Heritage sites.

Land-Based Activities Seen as Key

¶15. Assessing land-based activities that affect the marine environment is PERSGA's main priority. Their goal is to ensure that development is done sustainably. For the last few years, PERSGA has been assisting its member states, under a Global Environment Facility (GEF) grant, to develop and implement strategic action plans for coastal zone management. To accomplish this, PERSGA runs several training courses per year on such topics as coastal zone management, wastewater management, and sustainable tourism.

¶16. The two biggest components of that plan are assessing the effect of land-based activities on the marine ecosystem, and assessing the biodiversity of the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden ecosystem. These in turn have individual components: wastewater impacts, solid waste impacts, hazardous waste, water quality, and biodiversity hotspots. Dr. Abu-Ghararah said that NOAA assisted PERSGA with assessing the socio-economic aspects of the Integrated Coastal Zone Management plan for the region. With these quantitative measures on the health of the Red Sea in hand, PERSGA plans to identify gaps and priority areas, produce a project on managing the effects of land-based activities and submit it to GEF for funding.

¶17. PERSGA's upcoming five year plan focuses on economic development and poverty alleviation in coastal areas, and

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good governance for coastal and marine areas, including public participation.

Interested in Cooperation and Support

¶18. Dr. Abu-Ghararah said that PERSGA would be very interested in American technical assistance in such areas as seawater chemistry, marine biology, environmental accounting, enforcement, coastline management, auditing, contingency planning, legislation and regulation. He noted the success of State's White Water to Blue Water program, and said PERSGA would like to apply some of the best practices from that program to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden area. Exchanges of Masters students would also be welcome, he said.

¶19. PERSGA will host in Jeddah the October 2007 meeting of UNEP's Regional Seas program. That meeting will evaluate UNEP's Global Plan of Action on land-based activities that affect the marine environment.

Emergency Response to Marine Pollution, Oil Spills

¶10. PERSGA has assisted its members in opening a Marine Emergency Mutual Aid Center (MEMAC) in Hurghada, Egypt and in developing a contingency plan for marine pollution emergencies such as oil spills. The MEMAC, similar to but not affiliated with another MEMAC center in Bahrain, works with individual countries to develop their marine contingency plans. MEMAC is a focal point for gathering information such as types and locations of equipment, points of contact and so on. In event of an emergency, MEMAC would gather and distribute information, and organize the deployment of manpower and equipment from the individual countries in the region.

NGO "Reef Chief" Doing Its Part

¶11. ESTH Officer and E/P Chief also met Mr. Tarek Taher, a businessman with a strong love for the Red Sea. Mr. Taher has formed an NGO called "Reef Chief" and is organizing activities to protect, promote and assess the marine environment in the Red Sea. He funded and produced a short but heartfelt documentary called "My Planet - The Red Sea" that he introduced and showed at the JEDDAH ECONOMIC FORUM on February 13 of this year. Reef Chief has been documenting the Red Sea's aquatic life and using the video and other means to raise awareness. Noting that he is "an amateur," Mr. Taher is interested in supporting scientific activities in the Red Sea, such as turtle tagging, and asked for assistance to beef up his organization's ability to do a professional job.

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